

Advice for Churches from the Surgeon General: Preparing Your Church for Coronavirus

The Surgeon General's advice for churches: good hygiene, and it's time to "limit touching, especially hand-to-hand."

Don't panic... Stop buying masks... Wash your hands.

And, stop shaking hands in church.

All of those were part of a conversation this morning with Surgeon General Jerome Adams. A small group of faith-based leaders met with Adams to talk about how the faith-based community might respond to the spread of HIV/AIDS, with the reality that the states with the fastest-growing new incidents of HIV are states that are rural and more religious. Surgeon General Adams talked much about the role faith-based communities have in public health, sharing some of his own story. Furthermore, the administration has been engaging in issues of the opioid epidemic, mental health, and other major concerns.

Health should always be a priority for us. This may be true now than ever as we watch the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) spread its way through the globe—Hong Kong, Italy, Korea, and more. You can, in fact, find today's coronavirus facts on the World Health Organization's update page [here](#). As of today, there are over 90,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 globally, 64 of those being in the United States. (See updates for the U.S. [here](#).) Of course, compare this to over 18,000 people who have died of the flu this year so far.

However, because this virus is so new and many of us feel unprotected, our first response may be one of fear. Many Americans have in fact even been purchasing protective masks at such a rate that the Surgeon General wrote this in a recent [CNN op-ed piece](#):

Masks are not recommended for use by most Americans and hoarding of masks can actually hurt our response by reducing the supply available for medical professionals who need them. It's critically important our health providers have masks and other medical supplies when caring for people who have been exposed to the virus.

Protecting ourselves against disease is not a bad thing, and my stock of hand sanitizer is evidence that I'm a believer, but there are more basic precautions we can take as first measures.

So let's back up.

In fact, during our meeting this morning, the Surgeon General expressed that "the risk to any individual [American] is incredibly low." However, he cautioned that, "We can't hermetically seal the United States" and that the coronavirus task force is moving to a phase of seeking to "limit the spread of cases in the community."

He pointed out that other rapidly spreading diseases like SARS, MERS, and others were successfully addressed with “basic public health precautions” and emphasized that the most important thing a person can do is to “wash hands frequently.”

Perhaps you’ve seen the meme going around lately that reminds us all that even when we don’t have a global pandemic, we should wash our hands.

That’s sage advice.

Time for social distancing?

There are three ways governments are dealing with coronavirus right now and I believe all are important as researchers and health practitioners seek to better understand COVID-19: isolation, quarantine, and social distancing. For most of us, the first two are not very applicable and are aimed at specific individuals (though [Craig Groeschel and Bobby Gruenewald are currently quarantined](#)). But the latter is something that all of us would benefit from during the spread of this virus.

Social distancing, according to an [article on Vox](#), refers to “a slew of tactics meant to keep people from congregating in large crowds, to slow the spread of a virus.” According to the article:

Unlike quarantine and isolation, social distancing orders typically apply to whole communities, not specific individuals,” Lindsay Wiley, a health law professor at the Washington College of Law, explains in an email. These measures include postponing or canceling mass gatherings like sporting events, concerts, or religious gatherings. It could mean closing schools or encouraging telework.

Yes, postponing or cancelling church gatherings may or may not be on the horizon (and are already happening in some countries, but [also here in Washington state](#)).

However, for now, my takeaway from the meeting this morning was this: (1) hand sanitizer is not a bad thing and (2) our churches can be taking a few early preventative steps.

Here are three ways you can start preparing your church for Cononavirus:

First, communicate well with your church when it comes to your commitment to keep your people as healthy as possible.

This includes reminding your people that if they have any type of symptoms of coughing, sneezing, fever, nausea, achiness, or any flu-like symptom, to stay home. Remind them that you love them, but that you can see them next week if they are experiencing anything that may be contagious.

Second, reeducate your church staff and volunteers regarding good hygiene for all.

Especially those working with older and younger populations need to enforce the importance of hand-washing and good health practices with all those in your programs. Remind them that we need to be especially cautious of those who may have suppressed immune systems.

Finally, now might be a good time to (at least temporarily) modify routines that may threaten to spread disease.

For example, during the greeting time (if you have one), encourage people to simply say hello instead of shaking hands or hugging. (We used elbow bumps in our meeting this morning.) Already churches have been considering [altering their practices](#), and it appears to be time to increase those measures just a bit.

The Surgeon General emphasized that we will know a lot more "in a week or two" on how this will play out, and in some places "large public gatherings" such as church services may have to be restricted.

However, social distancing is something that should start happening now. I specifically asked if we should be limiting church activities like shaking hands. He responded, "It is prudent to limit touching, especially hand-to-hand."

So, for now, let's do all we can to run from fear and into good health practices that we should all be engaging in every day.

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